

The Elder at Iasnaia Poliana

Lev Tolstoi and the Orthodox *Starets* Tradition

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In his activity as religious teacher and counselor, Lev Tolstoi consciously stepped into the tradition of the Orthodox *starsy* or elders. We can see this both in the way he organized his “ministry”—publishing books of spiritual advice and receiving the faithful at Iasnaia Poliana—and in the way he was perceived and described by his contemporaries. On the one hand, this emulation is rather surprising, since Tolstoi on a number of occasions vehemently attacked the Russian Church and all it stood for. On the other, it may not be so incongruous after all: for Tolstoi, as for most Russians, Orthodoxy was the variety of Christianity they grew up with and knew, and its influence rubbed off also on its critics.

Tolstoi discussed Orthodox theology and spirituality directly or indirectly in several of his post-conversion writings. This is true both of fictional works like *Father Sergii* (1890–98) and *Resurrection* (1899), and of religious tracts like *What I Believe* (1884) and *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1890–93). In his famous *Reply to the Holy Synod*, which in 1901 had promulgated a public warning against Tolstoi’s religious teaching, Tolstoi retaliated by calling the teaching of the Russian Church “in its theory, an insidious and dangerous lie, and in practical terms, a collection of the coarsest and most superstitious sorcery.”¹

Indeed, Tolstoi often seemed to go out of his way to insult the religious sentiments of Russian believers, as in the famous communion scene in *Resurrection*. Another such case is *The Investigation of Dogmatic Theology*, in which he characterized the content of some of the most commonly used textbooks of Orthodox theology as “pure fantasy,” “blasphemous hallucinations,”

¹ L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (iubileinoe izdanie)*, 90 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1930–72), 34: 247. The public warning (*poslanie*) is often referred to as an excommunication, although the church authorities never explicitly confirmed that their intention had been to excommunicate the great writer. See Pål Kolstø, “A Mass for a Heretic? The Controversy over Leo Tolstoi’s Burial,” *Slavic Review* 60, 1 (2000): 75–95.

“outright lies,” and “pitiable and villainous distortions.”² A modern commentator, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, concludes, not unreasonably, that in many respects *The Investigation* is “a huge anti-Orthodox pamphlet.”³

This is not, however, all that can be said about Tolstoi’s relationship to Orthodoxy. Rancour-Laferriere points out that in some later writings Tolstoi softens and even completely alters his stance on some of the issues addressed in *The Investigation*, and as I have demonstrated elsewhere, even the message of *The Investigation* itself is much more ambiguous than what meets the eye: in this book, Tolstoi attacks the official Orthodox teaching about the nature of God—the doctrine of His omnipresence, His omniscience, and so on—by arguing that the essence of God’s being is completely unknown to us: He is *nepostizhim*. As it turns out, Tolstoi’s argument on this point is closely akin to the so-called “negative” or apophatic theology in the Eastern tradition, a way of thinking about God that Tolstoi had in fact found in many of the Orthodox texts he had read and by which he was clearly influenced.⁴

Most Western monographs on Tolstoi’s religion ignore the possible influence of Orthodoxy, while some Tolstoi experts acknowledge—but in passing only—that traces of Orthodox thinking may be found in Tolstoi’s teaching.⁵ Thus, for instance, Robert Donahoo has remarked that Tolstoi’s theology “is a strange mixture of orthodox Christianity, nineteenth-century European humanism, and Tolstoi’s personal idiosyncracies,” while A. N. Wilson claims that “Tolstoi is in some ways oddly a Russian Orthodox.”⁶

² Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 23: 80, *passim*.

³ Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *Tolstoi’s Quest for God* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 78.

⁴ Pål Kolstø, “Leo Tolstoy, a Church Critic Influenced by Orthodox Thought,” in *Church, Nation, and State in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking (London: Macmillan, 1991).

⁵ For scholars who ignore Orthodox influence, see, for example, Nicholas Weisbein, *L’évolution religieuse de Tolstoi* (Paris: Librairie des Cinq Continents, 1960); and G. W. Spence: *Tolstoy—The Ascetic* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1967).

⁶ Robert Donahoo, “Toward a Definition of *Resurrection*: Tolstoi’s Novel as Theology and Art,” *Literature and Belief* (1991): 1–12; A. N. Wilson, *Tolstoy* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1989), 320–21. Already in Tolstoi’s lifetime, some knowledgeable observers reached the same conclusion. After Tolstoi’s death in November 1910, the highly respected Russian theologian and church dignitary Antonii Khrapovitskii gave a talk on the topic “How Influence from Orthodoxy Is Reflected in Count L. N. Tolstoi’s Later Works.” The spiritual relationship between Orthodoxy and Tolstoi’s thinking went deep, Antonii asserted—much deeper, in fact, than Tolstoi himself had realized. Antonii (Khrapovitskii), “V chem prodolzhalo otrazhat’sia vliianie pravoslaviia na posledniia proizvedeniia gr. L. N. Tolstogo,” in *Zhizneopisanie i tvoreniia blazhennieshego Antoniiia, mitropolita Kievskogo i Galitskogo*, 17 vols. (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1978), 14: 247–68. Antonii had known Tolstoi personally and wrote no less than seven articles and small booklets about various aspects of Tolstoianism. For further details, see Pål Kolstø, “The Demonized Double: The Image of Lev Tolstoi in Russian Orthodox Polemics,” *Slavic Review* 65, 2 (2006): 304–24.

The literary scholar who most consistently has studied Tolstoi's system of thought against the background of Russian Orthodoxy is Richard F. Gustafson. In his celebrated study *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger* (1986), Gustafson went further than most in downplaying the theological differences between Tolstoi and the Russian Orthodox Church. He claimed, for instance, that "Tolstoy's God of Life and Love is an Eastern Christian God."⁷ However, even if it can be demonstrated that Tolstoi was deeply imbued with and influenced by Orthodox thinking, this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that he was less heterodox than he himself claimed and most of his contemporaries took for granted. Both his break with the Church and the continuity between Orthodoxy and Tolstoianism were strong and real. It is in the duality of attraction and repulsion that Tolstoi's attitude toward the Russian Church must be sought.

The semioticians Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii have claimed that Russian cultural history has tended to move forward in abrupt jumps, from affirmation to negation. At the same time they emphasize that the old culture does not vanish with the advent of the new. On the contrary, change "results from a transformation of the old, a process of turning it inside out."⁸ As an example of this, Uspenskii points to the figure of Peter the Great: "However paradoxical this might be, Peter's behavior in large measure did not exceed the bounds of traditional ideas and norms; it entirely confined itself within these limits, but only by means of a negative sign."⁹ A similar claim can be made with regard to Tolstoi's relationship to Russian Orthodoxy.

In *Confession* (1884), Tolstoi's first religious tract after his deep spiritual crisis in the late 1870s, he uses a tapestry metaphor to describe his understanding of Orthodoxy. This faith, he now claims, is "truth interwoven with

⁷ Richard F. Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy, Resident and Stranger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 108.

⁸ Jurij Lotman and Boris Uspenskij, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (to the End of the Eighteenth Century)," in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 30–66, here 33.

⁹ Boris Uspenskij [1974], "*Historia sub specie semioticae*," in *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, ed. Daniel P. Lucid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 107–16, here 112. Such continuity across seemingly unbridgeable chasms not only may be found in Russian history but is a commonly observed feature in many cultural situations. For instance, several historians of ideas have seen a clear connection between Friedrich Nietzsche's militant atheism and the religious tradition in which he was raised and that he attacked; his understanding of Christianity was informed by his deep immersion in Protestant thought. See, for example, Alf Ahlberg, *Friedrich Nietzsche—hans liv och verk* (Stockholm, 1923), 111. In a similar way, Jacques Derrida once remarked about Emmanuel Levinas that he "is very close to Hegel, much closer than he admits, and at the very moment when he is apparently opposed to Hegel in the most radical fashion" (*Writing and Difference* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978], 99, as quoted in Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], 230).

lies with the finest threads.”¹⁰ To disentangle the falsehood from the truth contained in Orthodoxy was an important part of his religious mission, as he himself defined it.¹¹

Occasionally, Tolstoi distinguished between an official version of Orthodoxy, which he despised, and an unofficial variety, which he admired. For instance, in the short pamphlet *Thou Shalt Not Kill* (1907), he wrote:

From time immemorial an unofficial, vigorous faith has persisted among the Russian people alongside the official faith. By some strange means it has become deeply rooted among the people, in their sayings, tales, and legends, disseminated through the holy lives of the elders, the holy fools, and the wanderers [*starsy, iurodivye, stranniki*].¹²

All three religious phenomena singled out for praise in this quotation—*starchestvo*, *iurodstvo*, and *strannichestvo*—are peculiarly Orthodox forms of piety with no direct counterparts in the Western religious tradition.

In this article I illustrate Tolstoi's complex and ambiguous attitude toward the Russian Church by examining his relationship toward the first of these Orthodox types of spirituality, the institution of *starchestvo*. This institution, I argue, Tolstoi actively copied in his own practice as spiritual teacher while at the same time radically changing this time-honored institution to serve his own purposes. I first give an account of the idea of *starchestvo* as it was practiced in the Eastern Church. Next, I demonstrate that Tolstoi was familiar with and fascinated by this form of piety, and finally, how numerous contemporary observers—believers as well as nonbelievers—recognized Tolstoi's style of teaching and counseling as tailored to the same pattern.

Starchestvo in Orthodox Theology and Practice

A *starets* was an experienced monk who possessed special gifts of spiritual wisdom and acted as a mentor to other monks. It is likely that he would have sought out total isolation in the wilderness before returning to human company to share the fruits of his spiritual experiences. The institution of *starchestvo* was linked to the prominent place of asceticism in monastic piety. The path of self-denial was considered to be so fraught with difficulties and perils that anyone wishing to pursue it required the support of someone who had gone before.

Between the *starets* and his disciples a powerful, almost unbreakable bond of obedience prevailed. It has often been pointed out that the first Eastern monks considered obedience to rank below the other classical

¹⁰ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 23: 53.

¹¹ Pål Kolstø, *Sannhet i løgn: Lev Tolstoj og den ortodokse tro* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1997).

¹² Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 37: 47–48.

monastic virtues—celibacy and poverty.¹³ This stands in contrast to the Western tradition, originating with St. Benedict, where obedience grew into the hub around which, so to speak, the whole life of the monastery revolved. In places where starchestvo gained a following in the East, Orthodox monastic pietism was in fact also distinguished by the prominence given to obedience even though it differed clearly from the Western model. While Roman Catholic monks take their vows vis-à-vis the monastic rules and the community (personified in the abbot), Orthodox obedience was to a much greater extent a personal relationship between the novice and his mentor or advisor.

The term “starets” has its origins in the Greek word *geron*, “old man.” This does not mean that the starets was necessarily the oldest monk in the monastery or the most senior in rank. The designation needs rather to be understood as an expression of profound respect for his spiritual maturity.

A starets might have one or many disciples, and there could be one or several startsy in a single place. There were no predetermined procedures according to which startsy were selected and appointed. The service was purely charismatic; that is, it was based solely on the belief of the other monks that the starets was in possession of a particular faculty to guide others. A new starets could be chosen by the novices or nominated by the previous starets as his successor. Ordination to the priesthood was not a requirement. The starets institution bypassed the established hierarchical order in the monastery. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii gives a literary account of the animosity this could bring about.¹⁴ Dostoevskii does not deny that the authority of the starets could lend itself to misuse, but nonetheless describes the service as an “instrument that has stood the test of a thousand years for the moral regeneration of mankind from serfdom to freedom and to moral perfection.”¹⁵

Novices were not the only people to seek the spiritual and practical guidance of the startsy. Laypeople did so, too. The belief was widespread that startsy possessed prophetic as well as therapeutic skills. Questions put to them could range from how to save one’s soul to whom one’s daughter should wed. It was usual for the spiritual children of a starets to confess their sins to him. This “confession” was not of a sacramental nature. Nevertheless it was frequently confused with the Church’s institutionalized sacrament of penance, not least because the startsy often prescribed a form of *epitimiia*—ecclesiastical sanction or penance.¹⁶

¹³ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1978), 179.

¹⁴ F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1888), 12: 81–88.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13: 37.

¹⁶ S. Smirnov, “Ispoved’ mirian pred startsamii,” *Bogoslovskii vestnik* (September 1905): 19–20; Sergius Bolshakoff, *Russian Mystics* (London: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 179.

Individual, spiritual counseling was not unknown in the West either, as a service separate from confession. In Roman Catholicism, however, this did not result in the same antagonism as in the East because, for one, the spiritual mentor was almost always an ordained priest.¹⁷

A concise presentation of the ideology underlying the Orthodox *starchestvo* is provided by the signature Pustynnozhitel' (Desert Hermit) in the journal *Dushepoleznoe chtenie* (1906). The author of the piece feels a need to respond to claims that *starchestvo* is a wasteful and useless invention. Even among monks he has heard allegations that what characterizes this institution of spiritual guidance is its proclivity to inform on people and spread gossip. He himself holds the opposite view, that *starchestvo* represents a necessary precondition for a regeneration of Russian monasticism. Only monasteries that establish the institution will have any chance to experience spiritual growth.¹⁸

The author wants first to show that *starchestvo* is deeply rooted in the Scriptures. In a number of places in the Old Testament, words for "old" and "eldest" are translated as "starets," in particular where respect for old age is being expressed (Lev. 19:32; Deut. 28:50; Job 5:10). In cases in which the elder is also given a special advisory role, the Scriptural passage is construed as lending support for the office of *starchestvo* (Deut. 32:7).¹⁹

Of particular importance as a justification of *starchestvo* is, however, the example of Jesus himself. It is not the role of Jesus as counselor, however, that should be emulated but his humility. Jesus is the prototype not of the starets but of the starets's disciple, and he shows the necessity to subject oneself to the will of another: "For I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38). In Gethsemane, Jesus entreated, "not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39), and showed thereby that he was "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).²⁰

When the starets-disciple relationship is regarded as analogous to that between God the Father and God the Son, the pretensions on the part of *starchestvo* are considerable. The starets acts with divine authority, and he who would submit himself to him must bend his will and entire thinking to the will of the starets. Obedience must be total and all-inclusive and flow from genuine love of, and faith in, the starets. The disciple must be willing to lay bare his life even in the smallest details. It is impossible to renounce one

¹⁷ Donald Corcoran, Sr., "Spiritual Guidance," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the 12th Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff in collaboration with Jean Leclercq (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 444–52, here 445.

¹⁸ Pustynnozhitel', "Starchestvo," *Dushepoleznoe chtenie*, no. 2 (1906): 210–21, here 211.

¹⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 217.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 211; see also Igor Smolitsch, *Leben und Lehre der Starzen* (Vienna: Thomas Verlag Jakob Hegner, 1936), 24–26.

starets for another. Not even when the orders of the starets cause bewilderment or seem impossibly strict is criticism of his decisions permissible.²¹

Pustynnozhitel' uses most of his article to provide support for starchestvo by reference to the writings of the Church Fathers, and among his most significant sources we find the famous compilation of monastic texts *Philokalia*. This book was translated into Church Slavonic in the late 18th century by Father Paisii Velichkovskii and his disciples under the title *Dobrotoliubie* and republished several times in Russia in the 19th century. Tolstoi had a copy from 1851 in which he had made a number of underlinings and remarks. A number of the authors assembled here crusade on behalf of starchestvo.

In *Dobrotoliubie*, Simeon the New Theologian entreats the monk to beseech God with tears to deliver a holy guide for him.²² The reason given is that he who obeys the will of another will not only learn self-denial but will become as if dead to the world.²³

The obedience of the disciple is compared with that of Jesus, and Simeon does not hesitate to draw the logical conclusion: the starets stands in the place of the Lord. "Regard your teacher and guide as you would regard God Himself, and then you cannot gainsay him."²⁴ Such advice appears to indicate that Simeon advocates blind submission to the authority of the starets. At the same time, however, he introduces an important distinction between good and bad teachers and emphasizes the need to be able to distinguish between them. Simeon gives two main criteria to help in making such a distinction. First, by his way of life, the starets must demonstrate that he follows the path of asceticism—that is, he must have suppressed his passions. The other prerequisite is loyalty to Holy Scripture and tradition. The disciple is encouraged to investigate on his own the Bible and the ascetic writings of the Church Fathers and hold up their meaning "as a mirror" to the precepts instilled by his starets.²⁵ Thus we see that the disciple's own faculty of judgment is not ruled out after all. Even though the substance of the teachings of the starets must be judged according to objective, external criteria—the Scriptures and tradition—in the end the disciple himself must determine whether he is able to find any consistency or not. But this critical examination must apparently take place only during the period during which the starets is being selected. From the moment a true guide has been found, his word counts as indubitable law.

In Russia, Optina Pustyn', a monastery in Kaluga province close to the town of Kozel'sk, occupied a special place in the starchestvo movement. It had been founded as far back as the Middle Ages but had survived many

²¹ Pustynnozhitel', "Starchestvo," *Dushepoleznoe chtenie*, no. 6 (1906): 203–10, here 203.

²² *Dobrotoliubie*, no. 1 (1902), section 1, fol. 55.

²³ *Ibid.*, fol. 56.

²⁴ *Dobrotoliubie*, no. 11 (1902), fol. 55.

²⁵ *Dobrotoliubie*, no. 1 (1851), fol. 55.

periods of decline; around 1700, there were no more than about a dozen monks. Optina did not experience a spiritual blossoming until early in the 1800s under its abbot, Moses, who had become acquainted with Paisii's reformist movement. Under the leadership of Moses, Leonid (Nagolkin) (1768–1841) became attached to the monastery in 1829 as its first starets. Makarii (Ivanov) (1788–1860) succeeded Leonid as starets in 1839. The last of the three great Optina startsy was Amvrosii (Grenkov) (1812–91) who became starets on the death of Makarii. Makarii and Amvrosii were ordained priests, in contrast to Leonid, who was not.

The startsy did not live within the monastery itself but dwelled in a skete some distance away in the forest. Life in a skete is supposed to be something between the total isolation of the hermit and the ordered world of the cenobitic monastery. The starets participated in the liturgical community of the monastery only on feast days and other special occasions. Otherwise he said his prayers either alone or in the company of a few disciples.

Amvrosii was denied the opportunity to live the life of a recluse devoted to meditation. Most of his working day was given over to receiving visitors and providing counsel or spiritual guidance. In addition, he dictated hundreds of replies to people who had approached him in writing.

Amvrosii's fame was so widespread that it was difficult to attend to the numbers of people queuing in front of the skete. Many waited for days at a time before gaining entrance, some even for weeks. Amvrosii had three assistants who grouped the crowd according to sex and rank. The men were received first, then the women. The evening was set aside for talks with the monastery's own monks. Prominent visitors could expect to be given an audience without having to wait in line.

As a rule, Amvrosii formulated his advice in concise sentences, often in rhyme. He always said that those who approached him must acknowledge his words as the will of God. If they did not, then his advice would be useless. People who did not act in accordance with his directions were warned that adversity and misfortune would befall them.²⁶ Many were the stories of his prophetic gifts, and there were many who said that they had been cured after he interceded on their behalf.²⁷

Excerpts from Amvrosii's letters of spiritual guidance have been published in several volumes and contain, in general, relatively conventional Orthodox admonitions. The advice he gave revolved most often around attending confession and communion with greater frequency, observing stricter fasts, and, above all, demonstrating greater humility. The term "humility" as used by Amvrosii nearly always had connotations of "obedience." The obligation to subject oneself to authority—be it the Church's or one's

²⁶ Bolshakoff, *Russian Mystics*, 190–93.

²⁷ Smolitsch, *Leben und Lehre*, 200–2.

parents' or guardians'—was a recurrent theme (“The egg should not teach the hen to lay”).²⁸ Amvrosii defended, among other things, the support lent by the Church to the military power of the state by saying that all authority would be undermined if the Church advocated actions contrary to those being pursued by the state.²⁹

Tolstoi at Optina Pustyn'

A number of Russian men of letters visited Optina Pustyn'. In Makarii's time the writers Nikolai Gogol' and Aleksei Khomiakov, the philosopher Ivan Kireevskii, and the historian Mikhail Pogodin made the pilgrimage there. Fedor Dostoevskii visited Amvrosii in 1878 together with his younger friend, the philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev. It is generally assumed that Amvrosii is the figure on whom the character of Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*—on which Dostoevskii was working at the time—is modeled.

But the year before Dostoevskii's visit, in July 1877, Tolstoi had called on Amvrosii together with Nikolai Nikolaevich Strakhov. This trip Tolstoi conducted during a period in his life when he tried to live as an Orthodox believer, and he evidently had high hopes for the meeting. In a letter to his devout relative Aleksandra A. Tolstaia dated February 1877, he touched on his reasons for setting out on the journey. Both he and Strakhov were convinced that it was impossible to live without religion but nevertheless could not bring themselves to believe, he explained. Tolstoi intended to explain his predicament to the monks at Optina.³⁰

The evidence is conflicting as to what Tolstoi actually gained from the visit. According to Sof'ia Andreevna, his wife, the wisdom, sophistication, and conduct of the monks pleased him no end.³¹ Aleksandra A. Tolstaia claims that Tolstoi returned “utterly persuaded of our Church's holiness and truth”;³² Tolstoi's biographers, however, describe the meeting with Amvrosii as a disappointment.³³ According to some sources, Tolstoi had begun to cross-examine the starets on his interpretation of the Gospels and was not particularly impressed with Amvrosii's answers. Amvrosii, in turn, was apparently just as unhappy about the visit as Tolstoi, but on this point as well opinion is divided. According to one report, on taking his departure, Tolstoi had kissed Amvrosii on the cheek. This was an ordinary way of showing

²⁸ Amvrosii (Grenkov), *Sobranie pisem blazhennye pamiati optinskogo startsa ieroskhimonakha Amvrosiia k mirskim osobam* (Sergiev Posad: Tipografia Sviatoi Troitse-Sergievoi lavry, 1908), 86 and 125.

²⁹ Ibid., 203–5.

³⁰ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 62: 311.

³¹ S. A. Tolstaia, *Dnevnik*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978), 1: 503.

³² A. A. Tolstaia, *Perepiska L. N. Tolstogo s gr. A. A. Tolstoi* (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1911), 22.

³³ Alexandra Tolstoy, *Tolstoy: A Life of My Father* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1975), 221–22; Pavel Biriukov, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi* (Moscow: Posrednik, 1911), 2: 261; Henri Troyat, *Tolstoy* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1980), 528–29.

respect in Russia in secular contexts, but inappropriate in a relationship between a man of God and a lay believer. Amvrosii firmly believed, therefore, that Tolstoi had done this to ward off the blessing the starets was to confer on him. This the starets judged to be an expression of spiritual arrogance, and he had been so exhausted by his conversation with Tolstoi that he was hardly able to breathe afterwards.³⁴ Nikolai Strakhov had heard another version, however. With his friend Pavel Matveev (an Orthodox believer) as his source, he wrote to Tolstoi to say that “the fathers [at Optina] are full of your praise and are of the opinion that you have a beautiful soul.”³⁵ Tolstoi replied that it gave him great pleasure to recall the startsy.³⁶

According to Pavel Matveev, while Tolstoi was at Optina he received news from home that one of his children had become seriously ill. He broke off the trip earlier than originally intended but paid Amvrosii a farewell visit. The starets gave a performance of his prophetic gifts, declaring that the child’s condition was not grave. Tolstoi could therefore safely conclude his fast at the monastery before returning home. If not, he would suffer depression and despondency. Tolstoi chose not to follow this advice, and Matveev sets this event in connection with the thoughts of suicide that, according to *Confession*, beleaguered Tolstoi during these years.³⁷

Whatever the outcome of this first visit, Tolstoi returned to Optina four years later, in June 1881, at which time he traveled together with his valet, Sergei Petrovich Arbuzov. This time Tolstoi kept a diary of the trip into which he entered his impressions. In the queue outside Amvrosii’s cell, he probed the reasons why others had come to the starets. Can a mass be said for the soul of a husband who has drunk himself to death during a baptism? Somebody else wanted to inquire if he ought to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Others were concerned with questions of a more mundane nature. Will my daughter ever be married? Should I build a house? A fifth wondered if he ought to start a business or open a tavern. Tolstoi’s notes do not reveal whether he found such concerns trivial or subjects worthy of a starets’s attention.³⁸

During the visit Tolstoi spent several hours with the starets Amvrosii, who was aware of the freethinking position the writer had developed since their last encounter and attempted to steer him back into the Orthodox fold. The conversation came to revolve largely around the authority of the Church.

³⁴ E. V., “L. N. Tolstoi i Optina Pustyn’,” *Dushepoleznoe chtenie*, no. 1 (1911): 19–27, here 23.

³⁵ N. N. Strakhov, *Perepiska L. N. Tolstogo s N. N. Strakhovym, 1870–1894* (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1914), 126.

³⁶ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 62: 338.

³⁷ P. Matveev, “L. N. Tolstoi i N. N. Strakhov v Optinoi Pustyni,” *Istoricheskii vestnik*, no. 4 (1907): 151–57; see also Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 23: 12–13.

³⁸ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 49: 143.

Amvrosii is credited with saying that the writings of the Church Fathers and the resolutions adopted by the church councils are revelations of God in line with the Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament. He also approached the subject of the hierarchic order in heaven: as there is a difference among a general, a colonel, and a lieutenant on earth, so will there be differences in rank in the kingdom of heaven. Tolstoi found the analogy distasteful, to put it mildly, and suspected that Amvrosii was concerned for his own future ranking in the hereafter.³⁹

If opinion is divided on the end result of Tolstoi's first visit to Optina, then consensus is no greater on the impressions he retained from his second visit. According to the signature E. V. in the Orthodox journal *Dushepoleznoe chtenie* (1911), Tolstoi is said to have remarked of Amvrosii that he is a "totally holy man." "When you speak with such a person, you sense the presence of God."⁴⁰ This statement has since been repeated by several biographers of Amvrosii,⁴¹ and in the most recent Amvrosii biography it is even reproduced in epigrammatic form on the jacket.⁴² In the earliest biography of Amvrosii, dating from 1900, there is no reference to any such utterance, and there is good reason to believe that it is a later apocryphal addition.⁴³ We know, however, that Tolstoi was aware of its existence and did not disclaim it, but it does not accord well with Tolstoi's own notes and the majority of his biographers have preferred to ignore it.⁴⁴ Biriukov alleges that Tolstoi "returned home with an even poorer view than the first time,"⁴⁵ and Tolstoi's daughter Alexandra writes that the stay at the monastery "pushed him even farther away from Orthodoxy."⁴⁶ Aylmer Maude reproduces the positive account by Amvrosii but suggests its trustworthiness may be open to discussion.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, we must conclude that Tolstoi found it impossible to get Amvrosii out of his mind. In February 1890, we find him at the Optina monastery for the third time, accompanied by two of his daughters. Judging from Tolstoi's diaries, however, the outcome of the meeting was rather negative.

³⁹ Ibid., 49: 144.

⁴⁰ E. V., "L. N. Tolstoi," 23.

⁴¹ Sergei Chetverikov, *Opisanie zhizni ieroskhimonakha Amvrosiia* (Kaluga: Tipografiia Shamardinskoi zhenskoi pustyni, 1912), 271; Smolitsch, *Leben und Lehre*, 198.

⁴² John B. Dunlop, *Staretz Ambrosy: Model for Dostoevsky's Staretz Zossima* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972).

⁴³ Arkhimandrit Agapit, *Zhizneopisanie v Bozhe pochivshogo optinskogo startsa, Ieromonakha Amvrosiia*, 2 vols. (Moscow: n.p., 1900).

⁴⁴ *Biblioteka L'va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo v Iasnoi Poliane*, vols. 1a, 1b, and 2 (Moscow: Muzei-usad'ba "Iasnaia Poliana," 1972), 1a: 273–74.

⁴⁵ Biriukov, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi*, 2: 388.

⁴⁶ Alexandra Tolstoy, *Tolstoy*, 242.

⁴⁷ Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, 2 vols. in 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2: 75.

"Woe be to them [the monks], for they live off the labor of others," he wrote in his diary during the visit.⁴⁸

Amvrosii died the year after Tolstoi's last visit, and his successors as startsy of Optina, Anatolii and Iosif, lacked their predecessor's fame and reputation. The stream of pilgrims to the monastery tailed off. Tolstoi did not visit the startsy again either. According the Jubilee Edition of Tolstoi's *Collected Works*, he is said to have traveled to Optina in 1896.⁴⁹ This has been refuted by Nikolai Nikolaevich Gusev and is in all likelihood incorrect.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, Tolstoi was to make a final trip to Optina. In October 1910, when he left his home for good, he lodged at the monastery inn there. During this stay he seriously contemplated requesting a meeting with the startsy. Twice he started out in the direction of the skete, but on both occasions he changed direction and wandered into the forest instead.⁵¹

It is impossible, on the basis of such fragmentary evidence, to form any firm conclusions regarding Tolstoi's opinion of the activities of the Optina monks. It does seem, however, that neither monastery life in general nor the teachings of the startsy in particular held much appeal for Tolstoi. Neither does Amvrosii's personality appear to have made a favorable impression. But given that Tolstoi returned time after time, there must have been something he was looking for at Optina Pustyn' which he was unable to find elsewhere.

In many ways, it seems as though Tolstoi was taken as much by the "atmosphere" surrounding the starets's skete as by the actual discussions on spiritual matters with the starets. In the travelers' dining room and in the queue outside the hermit's hut, he absorbed impressions. While the people around him had come to experience the starets, Tolstoi apparently came just as much to study starchestvo as a religious-cultural institution; he himself acted as a heterodox starets.

Several Orthodox apologists assert that Tolstoi was deeply impressed by the Orthodox startsy he met and held them in high esteem. These authors make the most of the fact that Tolstoi on several occasions visited the famous elders at Optina Pustyn'. After his interview with the starets Amvrosii in February 1890, Tolstoi, according to some Orthodox writers, is supposed to have said that he was "shaken, shaken."⁵² This apocryphal story, however, jars with what Tolstoi wrote about the meeting in his diary and is most probably

⁴⁸ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 52: 23.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 53: 453 and 83: 239.

⁵⁰ N. N. Gusev, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva L'va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo, 1891–1910* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960), 215.

⁵¹ D. P. Makovitskii, *U Tolstogo, 1904–1910: "Iasnopolianskie zapiski,"* 4 vols., *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, no. 90 (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), 4: 404–5.

⁵² E. V., "L. N. Tolstoi," 24; Chetverikov, *Opisanie*, 271.

not correct.⁵³ He held the startsy he met in real life in very low esteem, but at the same time he highly respected the institution of starchestvo as a form of piety. What is more, he copied starchestvo in his own practice of spiritual guidance, and a number of contemporary observers identified him as a new and “modern” starets.

A Heterodox Starets

As we have seen, the service of the starets was tied to the person rather than to the monastic institution as such. Already with Makarii and Amvrosii, the connection to the monastery was looser than it was for the ordinary monks: they lived half a verst from the main buildings and were mostly exempt from having to follow the rules of the monastery. Since starchestvo was an independent, autonomous service, it was possible to detach it even further from its monastic environment and situate it within a new, and less ecclesiastical, framework.

As a preacher, Tolstoi did not travel the roads as a popular speaker but received visitors at Iasnaia Poliana, people who came to ask for spiritual guidance and advice. During the final years of Tolstoi's life, his home had become as popular a Mecca as the Optina monastery. Like the monks, Tolstoi was sought out by the common folk as much as by representatives of the intelligentsia. He was loath to turn people away without having considered their case, “since he had no right, he felt, to forsake the faithful. He was a lay equivalent of the starets Amvrosii,” according to his biographer Henri Troyat.⁵⁴ Iasnaia Poliana had no inn for pilgrims, but no one was hindered from spending the night there. Everyone found somewhere to lie down for the night, in the main building, in the servants' quarters, or simply in a shed.

Tolstoi's last secretary, Valentin Fedorovich Bulgakov, gives an account of the motivations underlying people's desire to meet Tolstoi. Some came to win his support for some cause or other, such as a peace congress or a new school development. One said that he was a police spy and was hoping to find moral support in his struggle to unmask the revolutionaries. (He did not.) A large proportion asked for money—for instance, for a dowry, an education, or to escape from the country. One lady's prime ambition was obviously to secure a “relic,” to which end she asked for a strand of hair from Tolstoi's head.⁵⁵ Others, however, sought spiritual guidance. A consumptive Tolstoian confessed, on a bench in the park, that his illness tormented him.⁵⁶ It was Bulgakov's job to answer routine enquiries and attend to the least needy among the callers. In many ways, he functioned as a counterpart to Amvrosii's *keleinik*, the lay brother who assisted the starets.

⁵³ Tolstoi described Amvrosii as “pathetic” (*zhalkii*): *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 51: 23.

⁵⁴ Troyat, *Tolstoy*, 652.

⁵⁵ V. F. Bulgakov, *Lev Tolstoi v poslednii god ego zhizni* (Moscow: Pravda, 1957), 166–67.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 62–63.

Tolstoi received quantities of letters from people who desired to know his opinion on various questions. No fewer than 50,000 such letters have been preserved. Following the publication of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, a great many letters arrived inquiring about Tolstoi's opinion on matters concerned with married life.⁵⁷ Advice by letter from startsy was no novelty. Amvrosii's correspondence was voluminous; and Bishop Feofan the Recluse, throughout his time as a hermit, had kept in touch with his flock solely with the aid of the postal service.

Tolstoi replied to most of the enquiries, irrespective of whether they came from high or low, and the majority of his answers are preserved. They constitute an important background against which to understand his workings as spiritual adviser. A striking feature is the heterogeneity of his answers. In *The Path of Life*, Tolstoi wrote: "Christianity does not set out the same rules of life for everybody."⁵⁸ This was an insight that found only limited expression in his public writings, where general, categorical utterances abound. In his letters of guidance, however, Tolstoi was at pains to individualize his advice as much as possible, commensurate with the petitioner's situation. This was why he often wrote for more details concerning a person's circumstances before offering concrete advice.⁵⁹

A great deal depended on the tone, the atmosphere, of the letter addressed to him. In 1904, within the space of two weeks, Tolstoi received letters from two women who desired to know whether it would be appropriate to take part in the (Russo-Japanese) war as nurses. One of them denounced such Samaritan participation in war, and Tolstoi was in complete agreement with her.⁶⁰ The other, less decided, was told that this was a question she must try to resolve on her own. The essence of the matter concerned the attitude with which she intended to play her part.⁶¹ This latter piece of advice is typical of a large number of Tolstoi's replies. He would point out a few general guidelines, then send the ball back into the court of the inquirer. It was important to him to stress the need for personal independence and responsibility. As a starets, Tolstoi wanted to function not as an oracle but as a Socratic midwife.

In contrast, others received very concrete recommendations and diagnoses: "When you complain of fits of cheerlessness, it merely shows that your soul in ordinary circumstances is a strong soul."⁶² In some cases, Tolstoi attached a prediction to his advice: "I think it would be best for you to return

⁵⁷ Peter Ulf Møller, *Efterspil til Kreutzer-sonaten: Tolstoi og kønsmoraldebatten i russisk litteratur i 1890'erne* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1983), 130–41.

⁵⁸ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 45: 125.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 75: 55.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁶¹ Ibid., 35–36.

⁶² Ibid., 54.

to your father, and do try to induce in yourself good sentiments regarding his person. If you are successful in this, it will induce similar sentiments in him toward yourself.”⁶³

A recurrent feature in his replies is that Tolstoi recommended that the writer endure his circumstances, even if this compelled him to lead a life that conflicted with Tolstoi’s teachings. A young cadet wrote to say that he wanted to leave the naval academy and establish himself as an honest farmer. Tolstoi dampened his aspirations: “If it is at all possible [for you] to continue in your present walk of life, then do so.”⁶⁴ A priest who wanted to leave the service of the Church was asked to think carefully through his intentions. The path he would follow would be one of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.⁶⁵ A Tolstoian wondered whether he ought not to give way to his parents’ entreaties to arrange a church wedding. He was told that it was extremely difficult to set oneself apart from the conventions of society without simultaneously breaking God’s most important commandment: love of one’s neighbor.⁶⁶

People requesting the elucidation of general points in Tolstoianism without mentioning any connection to problems in their personal life were usually referred to Tolstoi’s published writings or asked to provide examples to illustrate their question.⁶⁷ The prayers of autograph hunters were often answered,⁶⁸ whereas people requesting money were generally bluntly reproached: “You seem to forget that I receive several letters like yours every day, and even though I might be of a mind to do so, I am not in a position to satisfy your wishes.... Be so kind as not to write to me anymore.”⁶⁹ Tolstoi ended this letter by wishing the addressee “greater peace and humility.” Like Amvrosii, Tolstoi demanded a certain amount of respect from his supplicants before meeting them halfway. Nonetheless, appeals for money continued to pour in, and in 1907 Tolstoi felt compelled to place an advertisement in two of the country’s largest papers in which he made it plain that requests of that nature would not be countenanced.⁷⁰

Quite often, Tolstoi was approached by people entertaining thoughts of suicide or suffering from serious nervous ailments.⁷¹ On several such occasions he said that he felt it was taxing to have to bear the distress of so many strangers. After a young seminarian had visited him for help with his masturbation problem, Tolstoi wrote in his diary:

⁶³ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁰ Nikolai Gusev, *Dva goda s L. N. Tolstym: Vospominaniia i dnevniki byvshego sekretaria L. N. Tolstogo, 1907–1908* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1973), 54.

⁷¹ For instance, Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 75: 51.

I was absolutely unable to give him any help at all. I spoke with him and gave him the money I had on my person. This is possibly one of the most difficult situations: a young person [*iunosha*] has completely exaggerated and fallacious ideas about me.... He comes here expecting complete redemption, and nothing happens.... This is a *drawback*⁷² of my otherwise enjoyable situation. The essential thing is not to hurry. And I didn't even pray in his presence, together with him.⁷³

The need to approach all deeds with prayer was something Tolstoi had learned not least from the startsy: "Yea, *everything, everything must be performed with prayer*, as also the startsy have said. Only not by a prayer of words, but by thinking of God and His will," Tolstoi noted in his diary a month later.⁷⁴

There is a good deal of evidence that the role of the starets was a role into which Tolstoi was forced first and foremost by his countless adherents and admirers. Like so many other startsy, he conceived of his counseling responsibilities as a cross he had no choice but to bear, and he accepted it as a necessary aspect of his work. It troubled him that he seldom managed to live up to the expectations his visitors had of him. In April 1909, Tolstoi wrote in his diary: "as I went out onto the balcony, I was surrounded by supplicants, and I was simply unable to show kindness to all of them."⁷⁵ Two nights before, Tolstoi had seen one of the Optina startsy in a dream—which one of them, he was unable to recall. The starets sent a letter to Tolstoi containing many paragraphs of "beautiful, calm, and affectionate starets wisdom." Tolstoi was intrigued especially by one of the thoughts in the letter: the starets had told him that he was no longer able to teach anything or advise anybody to live this way or that. He had realized, first, that he was no wiser than others and, second, that everything people needed to know was already revealed in the Scriptures. Third, all that transpired in the external world was immaterial (*bezrazlichno*) and had absolutely no effect on people's ability to attain inner, authentic rewards.⁷⁶

The roles had been reversed: instead of Tolstoi coming to visit the starets, in the dream it was the starets who came to him. Tolstoi was acknowledged in some way as the "startsy's starets." But this acknowledgement was undermined immediately thereafter. If the starets was unable to counsel others, then neither could Tolstoi. Tolstoi had no choice but to admit the relevance of the starets's arguments against spiritual guidance, simply because they were culled from his own religious writings. Thus the dream gives expression both to Tolstoi's self-awareness as a religious teacher and counselor and to his

⁷² Tolstoi used this English word in the original.

⁷³ Ibid., 50: 63.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 57: 51.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 50.

doubts concerning the value of his work. One can sense a similar ambivalence in other entries in his diary for the same period. Three months later, Tolstoi wrote that “I cannot help but wonder why God has chosen [*izbral*] a reptile such as I through whom to communicate with mankind.”⁷⁷ Even though Tolstoi here portrayed himself as a reptile (*gadina*), he did not allow this to shake his conviction that he had a divine message to convey.

Starchestvo in *Father Sergii*

The unfinished short story *Father Sergii* is the fictional work in which Tolstoi deals most directly with Orthodoxy in general and starchestvo in particular. A content analysis shows that Tolstoi in this fictional work did accept that this spiritual institution might indeed be a useful instrument through which one might attempt to reach a higher state of spiritual and moral perfection, but at the same time it was fraught with temptations and spiritual pitfalls.

Father Sergii relates the story of a young, handsome, and relatively well-off guards officer, Kasatskii, who is presented as an unusually goal-driven and ambitious man. He constantly sets himself specific targets and never gives up until he has achieved them. As Tolstoi sees it, this may start as a healthy attitude toward life, but it becomes misdirected. Kasatskii has chosen the wrong yardstick for his perfection—recognition from other people, not from God. His compulsive perfectionism becomes a scramble for success. Even when he proposes marriage, the driving force is not love but career prospects: his chosen one can lead him higher up the social ladder.

It emerges, however, that his fiancée is a cast-off mistress of the tsar and was to be handed down, only slightly the worse for wear, to Kasatskii. The “cynic” Kasatskii has been made the victim of the cynical games of others. Kasatskii’s entire carefully constructed position in society is on the verge of collapse. The only way for him to rescue his self-image is by giving the impression that he could not care less about the values for which he has lived until then—worldly honor and fame. Hence, the *monastery*—which can be seen as the supreme expression of rejecting the world with all its attractions.

As it turns out, however, the conditions that the monastery can offer Sergii are not so very different from what Kasatskii knew “in the world” (*u miru*). Also in the monastery he finds many an opportunity to let both the positive and the negative sides of his character unfold—his desire for perfection, his pride, his ceaseless energy. Here they assume more refined, spiritual forms of expression, but Sergii’s yardstick has not changed. He still thirsts for recognition from others—all he has done is to exchange his officer comrades for his fellow monks. But beneath his obedience to the abbot, a deep aversion has been growing in Sergii. It finds expression in a new outburst of rage: in the midst of a service, Sergii is called up to the altar to be shown off

⁷⁷ Ibid., 93.

to a visitor—exhibited “like an animal.” Later Sergii begs forgiveness for his pride, but soon afterward leaves the monastery for a hermit’s hut in another district.

The main portion of the story of *Father Sergii* deals with his career as starets. Starchestvo, too, can be turned into a career, and Sergii becomes a starets in the fullest sense of the term: he is a holy man, with an ascetic lifestyle and supernatural, miracle-working powers. People come from far away to receive his advice and blessing. Tolstoi explicitly places Sergii in the tradition of the monks from Optina: Sergii’s confessor and advisor in the first monastery was a pupil of Amvrosii.⁷⁸

In his hut, Sergii continues his struggle against temptation and against his temper. On two occasions, his chastity is put to the test. After six years in the hut he is visited by a rich, beautiful, immoral woman who has made a wager that she can get the famed starets to drop his guard and let her spend the night with him. Convinced that it is the devil himself who has come to tempt him, Sergii takes an axe and chops off one of his own fingers, to numb his desire with physical pain. The woman flees in horror. Reports of this deed of faith (*podvig*) spread rapidly, and monks and *stranniki* flock to his hermit hut to partake of the starets’s miraculous powers. Forced to lay hands on the sick, he discovers to his consternation that they are healed. His fame spreads throughout Russia and beyond, to Europe.

But Sergii is not strong enough to take so much success. His new fame gives rise to vanity and arrogance, and he even begins to compare his own acts with those of the saints and Christ himself. Yet thanks to his “remarkable truthfulness” he remains capable of seeing himself from a critical perspective. Sergii restricts his ascetic diet to black bread with water but feels that the “source of living water” is drying out within him. There is less and less time for meditation and prayer—the “inner” is being replaced by the “outer.”⁷⁹ He discovers that once again he is being exploited: the monastery with which he is affiliated has been doing a thriving business in his works. But he continues to live up to the expectations placed on him, all the time asking himself: am I doing this for God or for man?

The second woman who tempts him is a simple merchant’s daughter. This time, Sergii yields without protest. The woman is voluptuous but feeble-minded: it is sheer animal lust that leads to his fall. The next day, Sergii cuts his hair, dresses in a peasant smock, and takes to the road. He has adopted yet another new identity—that of *strannik*. In *this* calling Kasatskii finally finds peace of mind.

⁷⁸ Strictly speaking, since Kasatskii lived in the times of Nicholas I, this was chronologically impossible.

⁷⁹ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 31: 29.

We do not learn much about Kasatskii's life on the open road. One episode, however, stands as an expression of the change that has taken place within him. One day he is stopped by a group of travelers. An estate owner and his family are showing some visiting Frenchmen what Russian rural life is like, and Kasatskii is stared at and cross-examined like a choice ethnographic specimen. This scene exhibits a clear parallel to the episode in the monastery chapel, where the abbot showed off Sergii to a visiting general. Objectively viewed, what happens to Kasatskii on the road is far more demeaning. Yet Sergii reacted with fury in the church, and Kasatskii with total calm and disinterest toward the French-speaking tourists: Kasatskii has internalized the monastic ideal of *apatheia*, or complete indifference to the reaction of others. He is dead to the world.

In Tolstoi's short story, then, the position of starchestvo is ambiguous. Tolstoi clearly presents it as an institution that can have a wholesome influence on people's spiritual development. It may not take the truth seeker all the way, but it is a step in the right direction. It can be compared to one of the lower rungs on John Climacus's ladder to heaven: from this new level, the adept may be able to reach higher. It is important that at his next stage of spiritual development—*strannichestvo*—Kasatskii does not leave Orthodox spirituality but moves into another time-honored Eastern Christian *topos*.

The main lesson which Kasatskii learns from Orthodox spirituality is the ideal of *apatheia*, the need to combat and renounce all earthly passions until one reaches complete equanimity and peace of mind. In the monastic tradition in Orthodoxy, in particular in the hesychastic tradition as preached for instance in *Philokalia*, this ideal was strong; and it can be demonstrated that it influenced Tolstoi's ethics.⁸⁰ The need to strive for *apatheia* was, however, a central message also in ancient Greek Stoicism, as expressed by, among others, Epictetus. Tolstoi read and approved of Epictetus's *Ethics*, and at this point Tolstoi did not have to make a choice between the Orthodox and non-Christian sources that influenced him. Rather, they were impulses that pulled him in the same direction.

Contemporary Reactions: A "Modern" Alternative

For modern Russians at the turn of the last century, it was no longer *comme il faut* to visit the monks at Optina. They belonged to a bygone age. Whereas Tolstoi, as we have seen, described starchestvo as part of the "unofficial" Orthodoxy that he admired, most contemporary Russians associated this spiritual institution with the official Church, which in turn was identified with the authority of the state. It was here that Tolstoi represented a "modern" alternative. Tolstoi's creed was purged not only of all forms of "superstition"

⁸⁰ Kolstø, *Sannhet i løgn*, 151–80.

but also of all connections with tsarism. It was possible to travel to Iasnaia Poliana without being suspected of harboring reactionary sympathies and supporting the regime.

Among the people who called on Tolstoi was the well-known *fin-de-siècle* writer Leonid Nikolaevich Andreev. In 1911, Andreev published his impressions in the magazine *Solntse Rossii*. He gave an almost hagiographic account of Tolstoi and asked: "Where else in this world would it be possible to meet such a good starets?"⁸¹ Others, however, were extremely critical of their reception at Iasnaia Poliana. In 1909, a letter was published in the newspaper *Slovo* from an anonymous worker depicting his unsuccessful meeting with Tolstoi: "I had hoped that he would be able to read, to define, the spiritual condition I was in, that he would understand and help me, etc. Good God! How I was suffering at the time. But the great thinker did nothing for me." The worker had shown Tolstoi a few small articles he had penned but was advised to burn them as soon as possible—they were that bad. Finally Tolstoi had asked the worker if he did not feel inclined to go by the kitchen to get some food, thus letting him understand that the audience was at an end.⁸² Episodes such as this were exploited by Orthodox anti-Tolstoian writers who claimed that Tolstoi's interest in his visitors was limited to the material they could furnish for his writings.⁸³

Not least after Tolstoi's death, "starets" became one of the frequently used epithets about him.⁸⁴ At this stage, the term "starets" was evidently perceived as a mark of respect that could be used to describe him without having to convert to his creed. A short time after the funeral, a commemorative volume was published that included obituaries and other items on Tolstoi. They had been culled exclusively from the liberal and freethinking press and contained a number of crude attacks on the Church for its treatment of Tolstoi. The style was generally pretentious and the metaphors often hyperbolic. With the demise of Tolstoi, the world had become "fatherless" (*osirotel*), implying that Tolstoi had been the "father" of mankind. Another term frequently used to describe him was "starets," often augmented by the qualifier "great." Nikolai Asheshov, in particular, invoked this term of honor as though it were a litany and capitalized the first letters of both components.⁸⁵

The Orthodox bishop Nikon of Vologda protested that the enemies of the Church had stolen the name "starets" from the holy language of the

⁸¹ L. N. Andreev, "Za polgoda do smerti," *Solntse Rossii*, no. 53 (1911): 2, as quoted in B. S. Meilakh, *Ukhod i smert' L'va Tolstogo* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1979), 12.

⁸² N. Chepurin, "Iz zhizni i ucheniia gr. L. N. Tolstogo," *Vera i razum*, nos. 19–20 (1909): 111–34, here 115–16.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ See Meilakh, *Ukhod i smert'*, 29, 34, and 37; Georgii Petrov, *Otluchenie L'va Tolstogo ot tserkvi* (Moscow: Znanie, 1978), 98.

⁸⁵ *Pamiati L. N. Tolstogo: Otkliki stolichnoi pechati poslednikh dnei* (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1911), 33–36, 48, 62.

Church to apply it to an apostate (*bogootstupnik*). In Nikon's opinion, the term should be reserved for ascetics (*podvizhniki*).⁸⁶ But not only the enemies of the Church applied the designation of starets to Tolstoi. It can be found in the writings of Christian authors, too.⁸⁷ This supports the theory that the institution of starchestvo was perceived as a transplantable outer form not indissolubly bound to a given spiritual content.

The opinion one had of Tolstoi could be expressed, moreover, by placing selected epithets in front of this title. To the reactionary Orthodox writer Ivan Georgievich Aivazov, Tolstoi was a godless (*nechestivyi*) starets,⁸⁸ whereas the liberal ecclesiastical author N. Smolenskii employed the distinction "Honorable" (*Mastityi*) starets with an upper-case "M." The priest Dmitrii Kazanskii viewed Tolstoi as a "thinker-starets," in contrast to the "startsy of the faith."⁸⁹ In 1936, Abbot Ioann (Shakhovskoi) called Tolstoi a starets in the same breath that he asserted that the philosopher of Iasnaia Poliana had been under the influence of the powers of darkness.⁹⁰

Several Soviet scholars applied the appellation of starets to Tolstoi.⁹¹ In cases such as these, however, its significance had become considerably diluted. It no longer stood for an authoritative spiritual counselor but a pious elderly man, with the stress on "elderly." Thus the term had returned to its etymological starting point. This probably explains why "starets" was used with increasing frequency in reference to Tolstoi as he aged. The age aspect often resonates in the writings of ecclesiastical authors as well.⁹²

It does not appear that Tolstoi ever styled himself "starets." In 1913, the Orthodox priest Dmitrii Egorovich Troitskii did print some letters Tolstoi had written to him in which the expression occurs: Tolstoi speaks of himself as "an 82-year-old starets."⁹³ In the Jubilee Edition, the same letter is

⁸⁶ Bishop Nikon (Rozhdestvenskii), "Iz dnevnika...", *Moskovskie tserkovnye vedomosti*, no. 50 (1910): 895–901, here 896.

⁸⁷ For instance, B. I. Gladkov, *Graf L. Tolstoi kak bogoiskatel'* (St. Petersburg: Izdanie avtora, 1914), 54; D. Skvortsov, "Tragediia dushi L. N. Tolstogo (Po povodu 'ukhoda' i smerti ego)," *Tul'skie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, nos. 1–2 (1911): 8–18, here 8; and I. Grigor'ev, "Khodish' i voskhishchaesh'sia," *Ekaterinoslavskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 4 (1912): 164–67, here 164.

⁸⁸ I. G. Aivazov, "Kto takoi L. N. Tolstoi?" *Tserkovnye vedomosti*, no. 34 (1908): 1622–28, here 1624).

⁸⁹ D. Kazanskii, "Dumy sel'skogo sviashchennika po povodu smerti grafa L'va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo," *Samarskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 24 (1910): 1611–17, here 1616.

⁹⁰ Ioann [Shakhovskoi], *Tolstoi i tserkov'* (Berlin: Za tserkov', 1939), 9 and 14.

⁹¹ For instance, V. D. Bonch-Bruевич, "*Zhivaia tserkov'*" i proletariat, 4th ed. (Moscow: n.p., 1929), 60; and Meilakh, *Ukhod i smert'*, 261 and 274.

⁹² For example, A. N. Ivanov, "Pis'mo k grafu L. Tolstomu," in *Tul'skie eparkhial'nye vedomosti* (1901): 257–72, 262, and 269; and A. S. Rozhdestvin, *Lev Tolstoi v kriticheskoi otsenke Merezhkovskogo* (Kazan: n.p., 1902), 14.

⁹³ D. E. Troitskii, *Pravoslavno-pastyrskie uveshchanie grafa L. N. Tolstogo* (Sergiev Posad: Tipografiia Sviatoi Troitse-Sergievoi lavry, 1913), 41.

published in a different version: *starik* is here substituted for *starets*.⁹⁴ This difference is of little significance, however; in both cases it is quite obvious that Tolstoi's purpose was to refer to his great age.

Tolstoi was well aware that others classified him as a *starets*. He read, among other things, a copy of the graffiti left by the visitors to Iasnaia Poliana in the gazebo in the grounds. Among the panegyric utterances there was homage to the "great, famous *starets*." Two others left the signature "pilgrim." Tolstoi said that he found the inscriptions "uninteresting."⁹⁵

There were certainly not only similarities between Optina Pustyn' and Iasnaia Poliana but obvious differences as well. A number of the attributes that tended to be associated with a *starets* are not found in Tolstoi. The supernatural abilities of prophecy and healing were absent, as was the necessity to subject oneself to spiritual authority. Tolstoi emerged as more of a "democratic" version of the *topos*, with greater stress on dialogue than commandments. Tolstoi took the form of the tradition but employed it in a new context. Most important, he used it to advance a different spiritual message, one that like the doctrine of the Church was derived from the teaching of Jesus but was cleansed of supernaturalism and what Tolstoi regarded as "superstition."

Jesus continued the late rabbinic tradition at the same time as he transcended it by his unprecedented and consummate interpretation of the authorities ("but I say unto you"). In a like manner, Tolstoi embarked upon the Orthodox *starets* tradition but broke with it by giving it a new content.

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⁹⁴ Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 82: 186.

⁹⁵ Bulgakov, *Lev Tolstoi*, 397–98.